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Conceptualizing Robotic Agency

Social Robots in Elder Care in Contemporary Japan

A virtual *u:japan* lecture by Anne Aronsson

Thursday
2021-03-18
18:30~20:00
online



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Japan is a hyper-aging society; it has one of the highest life expectancies in the world and is undergoing a demographic transition that Western nations have yet to experience. The Japanese government is encouraging robotic solutions to address its elder care labor shortage, and authorities have therefore adopted an agenda of introducing social robots. However, increasing numbers of people in Japan are becoming emotionally attached to anthropomorphic machines, and their introduction into elder care may

tween humans attributing agency to a being and those beings having the inherent ability to produce agency and how we might understand that difference if unable to access the minds of other humans, let alone nonhumans, some of which are not even alive in the classical sense. Using the example of an interaction between an elderly woman and a social robot, I engage with these questions; discuss linguistic, attributed, and inherent agencies; and suggest that a processual type of agency might be most appropriate for understanding human-robot interaction. Machines are already embedded in our lives, but, as we start to treat machines as if they are almost human, we may begin to develop habits that cause us to treat humans as almost machines. We therefore need to consider not only what social robots can do, both now



Dr. Anne Stefanie Aronsson is a postdoctoral fellow in the Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies at the University of Zurich and her current research focuses on elderly care in Japan and the use of robotic care devices, with a focus on social robots and emerging emotional technologies. She obtained her doctor's degree in socio-cultural anthropology from Yale University, United States.

She has authored several publications, including "Social Robots in Elderly Care: The Turn Toward Machines in Contemporary Japan," *Japanese Review of Cultural Anthropology*, as well as her monograph *Career Women in Contemporary Japan: Pursuing Identities, Fashioning Lives*. New York: Routledge.

thus be perceived as contentious by elders, caregivers, and family members. By exploring human engagement with social robots in the care context, this presentation argues that rapid technological advances in the twenty-first century will see robots achieve some level of agency, contributing to human society by carving out unique roles for themselves and by bonding with humans. Nevertheless, the questions remain of whether there should be a difference be-

and in the future, but also what humans will become by increasingly forming relationships with machines. I suggest that elderly people can develop an emotional attachment to social robots by attributing agency to them, and, as machine-learning routines grow more sophisticated, those robots will eventually interact with humans in such an insightful way that the division between attributed and inherent nonhuman agency might become meaningless.

<https://japanologie.univie.ac.at/ujapanlectures>
ujapanlectures.ostasien@univie.ac.at